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TO POLAND IN WAR-TIME



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A JOURNEY INTO THE EAST

BY

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FOR reasons which at first seemed to me somewhat obscure, that one of my companions whose wishes are law decided that our travels should begin in an unusual way by the crossing of the North Sea. We should proceed from Harwich to Hamburg. Besides being 36 times longer than the Dover-Calais passage this rather unusual route had an air of adventure in better keeping with the romantic feeling of this Polish journey, which for so many years had been before us in a state of a project full of colour and promise, but always retreating, elusive, like an enticing mirage.

And, after all, it had turned out to be no mirage. No wonder they were excited. It's no mean experience to lay your hands on a mirage. The

day of departure had come, the very hour had struck. The luggage was coming downstairs. It was most convincing. Poland then, if erased from the map, yet existed in reality ; it was not a mere “*pays du rêve*,” where you can travel only in imagination. For no man, they argued, not even father, an habitual pursuer of dreams, would push the love of the novelist’s art of make-believe to the point of burdening himself with real trunks for a voyage “*au pays du rêve*.”

As we left the door of our house, nestling in, perhaps, the most peaceful nook in Kent, the sky, after weeks of perfectly brazen serenity, veiled its blue depths and started to weep fine tears for the refreshment of the parched fields. A pearly blurr settled over them ; a light sifted of all glare, of everything unkindly and searching that dwells in the splendour of unveiled skies. All unconscious of going towards the very scenes of war, I carried off in my eye this tiny fragment of Great Britain ;

a few fields, a wooded rise ; a clump of trees or two, with a short stretch of road, and here and there a gleam of red wall and tiled roof above the darkening hedges wrapped up in soft mist and peace. And I felt that all this had a very strong hold on me as the embodiment of a beneficent and gentle spirit ; that it was dear to me not as an inheritance, but as an acquisition, as a conquest in the sense in which a woman is conquered—by love, which is a sort of surrender.

These were strange, as if disproportionate thoughts to the matter in hand, which was the simplest sort of a Continental holiday. And I am certain that my companions, near as they are to me, felt no other trouble but the suppressed excitement of pleasurable anticipation. The forms and the spirit of the land before their eyes were their inheritance, not their conquest—which is a thing precarious, and, therefore, the more precious, possessing you if only by the fear of unworthiness,

rather than possessed by you. Moreover, as we sat together in the same railway carriage, they were looking forward to a voyage in space, whereas I felt more and more plainly that what I had started on was a journey in time, into the past ; a fearful enough prospect for the most consistent, but to him who had not known how to preserve against his impulses the order and continuity of his life—so that at times it presented itself to his conscience as a series of betrayals—still more dreadful.

I express here my thoughts so exclusively personal to explain why there was no room in my consciousness for the apprehension of an European war. I don't mean to say I ignored the possibility ; I simply did not think of it. And it made no difference ; for if I had thought of it, it could only have been in the lame and inconclusive way of the common uninitiated mortals ; and I am sure that nothing short of intellectual certitude—

obviously unattainable by the man in the street—could have stayed me on that journey which now that I had started on it seemed an irrevocable thing, a necessity of my self-respect.

London, the London before the war, flaunting its enormous glare, as of a monstrous conflagration up into the black sky—with its best Venice-like aspect of rainy evenings, the wet, asphalted streets lying with the sheen of sleeping water in winding canals, and the great houses of the City towering all dark like empty palaces above the reflected lights of the glistening roadway.

Everything in the subdued incomplete night life around the Mansion House went on normally with its fascinating air of a dead commercial city of sombre walls through which the inextinguishable night life of millions streamed East and West in a brilliant flow of lighted vehicles.

In Liverpool Street, as usual too, through the double gates, a continuous line of taxi-cabs glided

down the inclined approach and up again, like an endless chain of dredger-buckets, pouring in the passengers, and dipping them out of the great railway station under the inexorable pallid face of the clock telling off the diminishing minutes of peace. It was the hour of the boat-trains to Holland, to Hamburg, and there seemed to be no lack of people, fearless, reckless, or innocent, who wanted to go to these places. The station was normally crowded, and if there was a great flutter of evening papers in the multitude of hands, there were no signs of extraordinary emotion on that multitude of faces. There was nothing in them to distract me from the thought that it was singularly appropriate that I should start from this station on the retraced way of my existence. For this was the station at which, thirty-six years ago, I arrived on my first visit to London. Not the same building, but the same spot. At eighteen years of age, after a period of probation and training I had imposed

upon myself as ordinary seaman on board a North Sea coaster, I had come up from Lowestoft—my first long railway journey in England—to “sign on” for an Antipodean voyage in a deep-water ship. Straight from a railway carriage I had walked into the great city with something of the feeling of a traveller penetrating into a vast and unexplored wilderness. No explorer could have been more lonely.. I did not know a single soul of all these millions that all around me peopled the mysterious distances of the streets. I cannot say I was free from a little youthful awe, but at that age one’s feelings are simple. I was elated. I was pursuing a clear aim, I was carrying out a deliberate plan of making out of myself, in the first place, a seaman worthy of the service, good enough to work by the side of the men with whom I was to live ; and in the second place, I had to justify my existence to myself, to redeem a tacit moral pledge. Both these aims were to be attained by the

same effort. How simple seemed the problem of life then, on that hazy day of early September in the year 1878, when I entered London for the first time.

From that point of view—Youth and a straightforward scheme of conduct—it was certainly a year of grace. All the help I had to get in touch with the world I was invading was a piece of paper not much bigger than the palm of my hand—in which I held it—torn out of a larger plan of London for the greater facility of reference. It had been the object of careful study for some days past. The fact that I could take a conveyance at the station never occurred to my mind, no, not even when I got out into the street, and stood, taking my anxious bearings, in the midst, so to speak, of twenty thousand cabs. A strange absence of mind or unconscious conviction that one cannot approach an important moment of one's life by means of a hired carriage? Yes, it would have been a pre-

posturous proceeding. And indeed I was to make an Australian voyage and encircle the globe before ever entering a London hansom.

Another document, a cutting from a newspaper, containing the address of an obscure agent, was in my pocket. And I needed not to take it out. That address was as if graven deep in my brain. I muttered its words to myself as I walked on, navigating the sea of London by the chart concealed in the palm of my hand ; for I had vowed to myself not to inquire my way from anyone. Youth is the time of rash pledges. Had I taken a wrong turn I would have been lost ; and if faithful to my pledge I might have remained lost for days, for weeks, have left perhaps my bones to be discovered bleaching in some blind alley of the Whitechapel district, as it had happened to lonely travellers lost in the bush. But I walked on to my destination without hesitation or mistake, showing there, for the first time, some of that

faculty to absorb and make my own correctly the imaged topography of a chart, which in later years was to help me in regions of intricate navigation to keep the ships entrusted to me off the ground. And the place I was bound to was not so easy to find, either. It was one of those courts hidden away from those charted and navigable streets, lost among the thick growth of houses, like a dark pool in the depths of a forest, approached by an inconspicuous archway, as if by a secret path ; a Dickensian nook of London, that wonder city, the growth of which bears no sign of intelligent design, but many traces of freakishly sombre phantasy the Great Master knew so well how to bring out by the magic of his great and understanding love. And the office I entered was Dickensian too. The dust of the Waterloo year lay on the panes and frames of its windows ; early Georgian grime clung to its sombre wainscoting.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon, but the day

was gloomy. By the light of a single gas-jet depending from the smoked ceiling I saw an elderly man, in a long coat of black broadcloth. He had a grey beard, a big nose, thick lips, and broad shoulders. His longish white hair and the general character of his head recalled vaguely a burly apostle in the "barocco" style of Italian art. Standing up at a tall, shabby, slanting desk, his silver-rimmed spectacles pushed up high on his forehead, he was eating a mutton-chop, which had been just brought to him from some Dickensian eating-house round the corner.

Without ceasing to eat he turned to me his barocco apostle's head with an expression of inquiry.

I produced elaborately a series of vocal sounds which must have borne sufficient resemblance to the phonetics of English speech, for his face broke into a smile of comprehension almost at once.— "Oh it's you who wrote a letter to me the other day from Lowestoft about getting a ship." "

I had written to him from Lowestoft. I can't remember a single word of that letter now. It was my very first composition in the English language. And he had understood it, because he spoke to the point at once, explaining that his business, mainly, was to find good ships for young gentlemen who wanted to go to sea as premium apprentices with a view of being trained for officers. But he gathered that this was not my object. I did not desire to be apprenticed. Was that the case?

It was. He was good enough to say then, "Of course I see that you are a gentleman too. But your wish is to get a berth before the mast as an Able Seaman if possible. Is that it?"

It was certainly my wish; but he stated doubtfully that he feared he could not help me much in this. There was an Act of Parliament which made it penal to procure ships for sailors. "An Act—of—Parliament. A law," he took pains to impress

it again and again on my foreign understanding, while I looked at him in consternation.

I had not been half an hour in London before I had run my head against an Act of Parliament! What a hopeless adventure! However, the barocco apostle was a resourceful person in his way, and we managed to get round the hard letter of it without damage to its fine spirit. Yet, strictly speaking, it was not the conduct of a good citizen. And in retrospect there is an unfilial flavour about that early sin. For this Act of Parliament, the Merchant Shipping Act of the Victorian era, had been in a manner of speaking a father and mother to me. For many years it had regulated and disciplined my life, prescribed my food and the amount of my breathing space, had looked after my health and tried as much as possible to secure my personal safety in a risky calling. It isn't such a bad thing to lead a life of hard toil and plain duty within the four corners of an honest Act of

Parliament. And I am glad to say that its severities have never been applied to me.

In the year 1878, the year of "Peace with Honour," I had walked as lone as any human being in the streets of London, out of Liverpool-street Station, to surrender myself to its care. And now, in the year of the war, waged for honour and conscience more than for any other cause, I was there again, no longer alone, but a man of infinitely dear and close ties grown since that time, of work done, of words written, of friendships secured. It was like the closing of a 36-year cycle.

All unaware of the War Angel already waiting, with the trumpet at its lips the stroke of the fatal hour, I sat there, thinking that this life of ours is neither long nor short, but that it can appear very wonderful, entertaining, and pathetic, with symbolic images and bizarre associations crowded into one half-hour of retrospective musing.

I felt, too, that this journey, so suddenly entered

upon, was bound to take me away from daily life's actualities at every step. I felt it more than ever when presently we steamed out into the North Sea, on a dark night fitful with gusts of wind, and I lingered on deck, alone of all the tale of the ship's passengers. That sea was to me something unforgettable, something much more than a name. It had been for some time the school-room of my trade. On it, I may safely say, I had learned, too, my first words of English. A wild and stormy abode, sometimes, was that fine, narrow-waters academy of seamanship from which I launched myself on the wide oceans. My teachers had been the coasting sailors of the Norfolk shore. Coast men, with steady eyes, mighty limbs, and gentle voice. Men of very few words, which at least were never bare of meaning. Honest, strong, steady men, sobered by domestic ties, one and all, as far as I can remember.

That is what years ago the North Sea I could

hear growling in the dark all round the ship had been for me. And I fancied that I must have been carrying its voice in my ear ever since, for nothing could be more familiar than those short, angry sounds I was listening to with a smile of affectionate recognition.

I could not guess that before many days my schoolroom would be desecrated by violence, littered with wrecks, with death walking its waves, hiding under the waters. Perhaps while I am writing these words the children, or may be the grandchildren, of my pacific teachers are out in drifters, under the Naval flag, dredging for German submarine mines.

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